

A Study of Shang Yang's Symbolic Pictorial Language—Take the “Nature” Pictorial of the “Dong Qi Chang Project” Series as an Example

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Abstract: Landscape and natural scenery has always been an important motif in Shang Yang's paintings, incorporating a sense of traditional classical landscapes into contemporary painting. This paper analyses the nature and landscape motifs of Shang Yang's art, using his Dong Qichang series paintings as a case study, and argues that his symbolic pictorial language focuses on the “mother nature”, which is a combination of traditional Chinese art and contemporary art, fulfilling the goal of building the contemporaneity of his art in the context of Chinese tradition.

Keywords: Shang Yang, Symbolization, Figurative Language, Contemporary Art

1. Introduction

“I have been expressing my concern for human and environmental issues in my work since the early nineties. Over time, in the midst of increasingly profound existential experiences, I have been unable to leave behind my thoughts on this issue. I have always tried to give a unique expression to this reflection because it is my *raison d'être* as a visual artist. The kind of expression I seek consists of just three simple elements: contemporary, Chinese and my own.” --Shang Yang

Shang Yang is an “evergreen tree” in the field of Chinese contemporary art. Since the “85th New Wave Art Movement”, he has concentrated on the diversification of artistic language, especially on the depth of understanding and comparison between the Western modern and post-modern art concepts and the commonalities and differences in the Chinese literati art tradition. He has established a unique personal style through philosophical discernment and cultural criticism, whether in his early “Yellow Earth Series”, his acclaimed “Great Landscape Series”, or his extended works “Dong Qichang Series”. Dong Qichang Series, all of which occupy an important place in the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Born in Hubei Province in 1942, Shang Yang graduated from the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts with a master's degree in 1981 and taught at the School of Fine Arts of Capital Normal University in 2000. In the early nineties Shang Yang experimented with several different styles, but from the mid-nineties he began to work on two major series of paintings, The Great Landscape and The Dong Qichang Project, which continues to this day, showing his reverence for traditional Chinese landscape painting and his sadness at the climate of the 21st century. The focus on “mother nature gone bad” is the core painting language of Shang Yang's art. The Dong Qichang Project series, as a continuation of the Great Landscape series, is also a mature stage of his artistic iconography, and it is therefore the focus of this paper to examine how Shang Yang's symbolic iconographic language is reflected in the Dong Qichang Project, and how the classical Chinese aesthetic of “nature” is presented in the language of contemporary art.

2. The “Landscape” Symbol in the Dong Qichang Project

Dong Qichang was a famous calligrapher, painter and statesman of the Ming Dynasty. In his view of art, Dong Qichang opposed the predominance of rational elements in his work, advocating a realm of “epiphany”. Such a realm focuses on the mystical experience that arises from the interaction between the creator's mind and nature, in order to obtain a language of expression and a formal state of mind. In terms of the Western aesthetic model, Western aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, is the opposition between the aesthetic subject and the object, and the aesthetic principle of “imitation of nature” was formed as early as the ancient Greek period, from ancient Greece, Rome to modern times, the pursuit of “truth”

From ancient Greece and Rome to modern times, the pursuit of “truth” has been the dominant tradition in Western painting and other arts, while Chinese painting has taken “evocative” as the basic criterion for painting and its aesthetics. At a certain point in the development of this opposition between subject and subject matter, the deconstruction and critique brought about by “postmodernism” emerged. During this development, Eastern ideas also began to enter the Western perspective, such as the exploration of the “Zen” realm, which was the basis for Dong Qichang’s distinction between the Northern and Southern schools of thought.

Shang Yang’s Dong Qichang Project is a continuation of his earlier “Great Landscape” series of conceptual expressions of nature, as well as a new round of reflections on the changes in society, culture and the natural environment. He subjectively combines the pictorial symbols of traditional Chinese landscape painting with the stylistic language of German Expressionism, and adds modern photography and spectral collage to create a new landscape scene^[1]. The first work in The Dong Qichang Project is Dong Qichang Project-2, a “three-stage” presentation from left to right in a tiled format. The third is a digitally modelled landscape, a virtual “networked” landscape. These “landscape” images are the most direct and intuitive way of destroying “pain”, allowing the viewer to feel the disappearance and mutation of natural “landscapes”, revealing the cultural history and social changes of The connotations of cultural history and social change are revealed.

Shang Yang has juxtaposed the three parts of the picture in different ways, juxtaposing the way the ancients viewed and reproduced the landscape with the way modern people see it. In this work, the artist first emphasises the sense of time that has accumulated in the landscape, or rather, a compressed nature of time and space. This sense of time is mainly reflected in the differences in the way people view, understand and reproduce nature, and in the styles they develop. It is clear that the landscape created by Mi Yuanhui's rich ink colours is a world away from the contemporary digitally modelled landscapes. At the same time, the traditional way of viewing scroll paintings reinforces the sense of time that lurks behind the works. In addition to the conceptualisation of nature, the artist has injected a sense of deconstruction into the work. This is evident in two ways: first, at the bottom of the third painting, the artist refers to his work in a slightly playful tone as “imitating Dong Qichang”. However, in terms of the objects actually represented in the painting, they are not the landscapes of Dong Qichang, but rather three-dimensional digital images^[2]. Here, the artist has cleverly used the technique of 'playful imitation' to express his criticism of contemporary disregard for nature. Although this criticism seems silent and even helpless, it is nonetheless powerful. Another is that, although the artist has made use of the traditional form of inscribing poems on landscape scrolls, in The Dong Qichang Project-2, the proposed texts not only fail to form a complementary relationship between 'picture' and 'text', but are also words that are irrelevant to the subject matter of the painting. The words mentioned in Dong Qichang Project-2 not only do not complement the picture, but they are also words that are irrelevant to the subject matter of the picture. As this work was created during the SARS period, the artist has transformed some of the anti-SARS medication into a visual image, and has also included the image of 'washing hands' alongside The artist has also included the words "Wash your hands three times with soap" and "Rub your hands vigorously with running water". Undoubtedly, these everyday, life-like words will have a powerful deconstructive effect on the serious, literary or poetic language of the traditional literati.

From the first of the Dong Qichang series, some forty masterpieces have been completed, and from this series, Shang Yang borrows many of the traditional Chinese landscape painting patterns and the spiritual concepts carried by classical landscape painting. The juxtaposition of the real with the false, the mechanical image with the artistic form in the function of the picture, and the increasing confrontation between man and nature, the mechanisation of the landscape benefits us but also destroys the original nature. In this context, people are beginning to actively consider the relationship between man and his environment. Shang Yang has retained a great deal of blank space in his images, and his brush strokes are unrestrained in a sense of writing and wildness, giving the images an air of Chinese landscape painting. The de-coloured images become pure, simple and powerful, while harmonising the 'nature' in the picture to become silent. Shang Yang has reconstructed and deconstructed traditional nature and the real nature of modern society.

Since the end of the 1990s, Shang Yang has been concerned with the "cultural reconstruction" of the "mother nature" that has been "destroyed". The "flatness", "collage" and "juxtaposition" of the super-compressed nature in The Dong Qichang Project was an inevitable choice. It is also no coincidence that the period of its creation coincided with China's massive entry into a globalised market economy and digitalisation. During this period, Shan Yang almost abandoned traditional painting materials and began to use the most common industrial materials (asphalt, paint, etc.) and the most common digital images of the urbanisation period. It was during this period that “nature” was being rapidly urbanised on the one

hand and imaged on the other, the former in relation to “speed” and the latter in relation to “simultaneity”. Specifically, the question that Shan Yang explores in this period is what are the fractured characteristics of the “mother nature” under the new conditions of “temporal compression”? And how can these features be visualised?

Shan Yang confronts this question with two different postures: the extremely “realistic” and the extremely “spiritual”. The former, as a critic, confronts the extreme fragmentation and fragmentation brought about by the rational configuration of modernity’s plans, magnifying and presenting their destructive potential and pushing them to their limits, critically presenting the crisis of reality-work that is reflected in the series of large paintings in The Dong Qichang Project; the latter, as a painter, draws the spirit back to the primordial flood of nature in its undifferentiated state, the imaginative geography that emerged from the mythological stage, and these works are embodied in the series of small paintings that accompanied the Dong Qichang Project, namely the Album, the Journal and the Handwriting. For a long time, Shan Yang has worked with two bodies, one presenting the tears in current China and projecting them into large-scale labour; the other searching for bridging and presenting it into spiritual writing. These two bodies collide and repair each other. For a long time, Shang Yang has been switching between these two bodies: no matter how burst and fragmented the large paintings are, they are always smoothed out in the end with spiritual writing, and no matter how pale and muddled the small paintings are, there is always a scar on them.

As a typical symbolic language in the painting series of The Dong Qichang Project, landscape and other landscape elements are important mediums for Shang Yang's artistic and cultural awareness. For a time, he abandoned the flat creative techniques such as collage of the Great Landscape series and turned to fusing contemporary art into traditional landscapes, placing emphasis on the reconstruction and construction of traditional Chinese classical landscapes. The juxtaposition of digital images and classical landscapes, and the unobtrusive presentation to the viewer of the materials used in painting, such as clay, steel, asphalt and glue, which were produced in an industrial society, are elements that exist on the same plane in silent confrontation, yet orderly assembled into a harmonious visual image.

Dong Qichang is a marker, a historical base that gives the work a cultural identity that subverts tradition. It is the project that is the focus, experimental and uncertain, a process that demonstrates Shan Yang’s attitude and determination to continue exploring ways of conceptualising nature.

3. The deep internalisation of traditional and modern concepts of “nature”

The word “nature” was first coined by the people of the family system. The word nature has a very long historical origin and semantic connotation in Chinese discourse. Since the Song dynasty, the concept of nature has become inseparable from the moral nature of the earth (i.e. the nature of nature), and nature is combined with social order and moral concepts as a moral nature that exists within man, and the idea of morality as the nature of man itself is clearly expressed in Mencius, both in terms of self-generated movement or origin, law, and in terms of the order of things, man as The idea of the connection between nature and morality is clearly expressed in Mencius. This conception of the connection between nature and morality, with its social element of morality, leads to the socialisation of the laws of nature, i.e. to the recombination of law and lawfulness by the dimension of social order, to the justification of 'nature' by man as a proper people, and as a result, whether willingly or not, to the transformation of nature from nature of heaven to nature of man. This transformation of nature from heaven to man began to take effect from the Song dynasty onwards. Landscape painting, a Chinese style of landscape painting, gained its legitimacy from Wei and Jin metaphysics and early Buddhism, and the idea of nature in painting and travelling in the landscape originated. The direct shaping of painting and the distinctive Chinese aesthetic paradigm by moral cultivation thus relies on the separation of cultivation and Confucian ethics.

In fact, Shan Yang has been thinking about how to move away from geographical limitations to a broader meaningful object. In the process of continuous exploration and practice, Shang Yang realised the significance of “nature (landscape)”. Landscape implies the essence of classical Chinese aesthetics, infused with the morality of humanity and spiritual order. From the beginning of The Dong Qichang Project, Shang Yang has repeatedly used and confirmed this iconography in his own artistic creations. The cultural concept and historical consciousness behind the symbol of “landscape” does not explicitly refer to a specific phenomenon, which gives the iconography a more general connotation, showing a universal meaning that transcends specific images^[3]. “Landscape” also implies a historical concern. This is why Shang Yang chose 'landscape' as a symbolic expression in his paintings, using traditional landscape patterns to connect with the present reality, where the aesthetic interest of traditional

landscapes is abstracted, cultural iconography is fused with inner concepts, and the objective landscape is further created as a spiritual landscape.

In his works there is a strong and simple “classical temperament and contemporary spirit”, presenting a “landscape” pattern and “landscape” consciousness. Between heaven and earth, in the mountains and rivers, man and nature are one and the same, revealing the aura of “heaven and earth are connected, and all things are created”^[4]. The vase of flowers in the lower right corner of the painting seems to have a different meaning, placed between the white mountain lovers, the chaotic and blurred traces of which awaken people who have been intoxicated by the vapourlessness of the scene, only to realise that the post-modern “landscape” has long since ceased to be the pure landscape of nature. The destruction of the original landscape has drawn his attention to the problems of man and nature, the environment and society, a common dilemma brought about by the development of modern society. Under the ethic of “humanistic concern”, he explored and searched for the schema of “landscape” and the consciousness of “landscape” in order to find answers to the value of survival and the meaning of life. Later on, in the Dong Qichang Project, he challenged the use of retro forms to resist modernisation by pretending to be traditional, leaving some of the paintings in contemporary art under the spell of colonisation and suspended in historical inquiry, the “presence” of tradition in modern times is no longer a copy of history. The imagery of the landscape has long been constructed in such a way that the traces of traditional landscapes are no longer visible, but rather that the mind reproduces the tradition in the “landscape”^[5]. In the field of Chinese contemporary art, Shang Yang is highly regarded for his unique form of painting.

Du Xi Yun has commented: "There are actually three natures in The Dong Qichang Project. The first is the initial nature, i.e. the purely objective, self-referential nature which, although not visible in the final picture, is the base part of the picture. Secondly, there is the nature that emerged in the age of mechanical reproduction, a large area of reproduction of a landscape scene. Finally, there is the nature in the artist's mind, painted in his own unique painting language." In his creative grasp, Shang Yang has always required himself to adhere to three levels at the same time: firstly, the context must be contemporary; secondly, it must be Chinese consciousness; and thirdly, from my personal feelings, if the balance between the three is not achieved, but for some reason over-emphasises one point, it is all wrong in Shang Yang's eyes. The Dong Qichang Project is a masterpiece of this practice.

4. The Chinese Expression of Postmodern Art

Dong Qichang is the last of the traditional Chinese calligraphers and painters with a sense of cultural identity. Every era of Chinese painting and calligraphy, and the history of painting and calligraphy throughout history, exists in partial, limited, fragments, and only a few diligent and self-conscious talents have been able to assemble its greatness and piece it together into as complete an outline as possible. Dong Qichang was one of these rare individuals. Chinese landscape painting took on a name or consciousness in Dong Qichang as a northern and southern clan, and his diligence, work, vision and contacts were all rare, so that he was able to ascend to the top or 'ascend Mount Tai and see the world', and he saw the mountains and the water with sufficient sensitivity. Dong Qichang's contribution to literati painting and calligraphy can be ranked with that of Wang Wei, Su Dongpo and Zhao Mengfu, so much so that eight years after his death, when the Ming dynasty had been squeezed into the southern part of the country by the Qing government, the Southern Ming government still awarded Dong Qichang the same posthumous title as Zhao Mengfu, “Wenmin”.

However, the limitations of Dong Qichang are obvious. He provided later generations with a philosophical analysis of painting, advocating literati painting by using Zen as a metaphor for painting, and emphasising the moral cultivation and intellectual realm of painters, which had a positive impact on the development of Chinese painting. However, the “North-South Theory” also fuelled sectarianism in painting, with obvious negative effects. Driven by the May Fourth movement to reassess the value of traditional culture, Dong Qichang and his North-South theory were sharply criticised as never before. As Xu Beihong once said, “I especially hate Dong for cutting off Chinese painting for over two hundred years, a great sin.”

There is no doubt about the modern vision of the New Culture Movement, which, although it had revalued and even underestimated the figures in traditional culture, was not prejudiced against them and was not harsh on them. The new culture held the greatest respect for cultural figures such as Qu Yuan, Tao Qian, Li Bai, Du Fu and Su Shi, and held great respect for Dong Qichang's contemporaries such as Li Zhi, Tang Xianzu and the subsequent figure Cao Xueqin. Dong Qichang was highly regarded and astonishing in his own cultural landscape, but once he joined the new cultural landscape, his

shortcomings were immediately apparent.

Even apart from the vision of a new culture, Dong Qichang was problematic in terms of the marginal and out-of-place thinking of the evolution of traditional culture. While it is true that traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy had historical differences, and it is also true that there were differences between the North and the South, Dong Qichang failed to realise that he and his time needed to find a way out, to fuse the ancient and the modern with the North and the South. The breakthroughs of Wang Yangming and Li Zhi, the ideals of Tang Xianzu and Xu Wenchang, are expressions of the spirit of the times. But Dong Qichang's sensibility was too subtle, and instead lacked sufficient perception of the ideas of these original figures; his vision was broad enough to be more fatal in the event of 'selective blindness'; and his discovery and corroboration of artistic details was too self-congratulatory, so that when it came to the task of summing up traditional Chinese art, he and others could hardly provide an abundance of spiritual energy. Kang Youwei hit the nail on the head when he observed that Dong Qichang, 'despite his reputation, is like a Taoist monk who rests on his laurels and is cold and frugal. In his view, Dong Qichang, despite his reputation, was as cold and frugal as a Taoist monk who had taken a break from his work. If we take Dong Qichang here as a metaphor for the spirituality of late Ming society, and the great general as the Manchu iron horsemen outside the customs, we can say that this statement is both a historical fact and a civilizational and personal tragedy.

Shang Yang's title for his work, "The Dong Qichang Project", is a genius invention in art history. The functions and uses of Chinese art that Dong Qichang failed to realise were unfolded by Shang Yang. The human consciousness, immersed in traditional art and unable to break out and grow, took on an intuitive form in Shang Yang, and had the effect of a visualization of the existence of the Tao. More importantly, Shang Yang, with his modern vision, is redeeming the human heart in the landscape, pushing Chinese landscape or artistic landscape to a stage of decay and emptiness after consumer civilization, and thus appealing to all viewers to be able to look at astronomy and humanity.

There are many differences between Shang Yang and Dong Qichang. While Dong Qichang is institutional, traditional and cultural, Shang Yang is marginal, modern and living. Shang Yang may not have the vast and subtle understanding of a culture that Dong Qichang has, but Shang Yang has a solid and firm personal vision and virtuous dimension of modern life. In many people's eyes, Shang Yang is new, and this newness has his convergence with the frontiers of art; in many people's eyes, Shang Yang is also a former, older person, and this older person means that he has the virtuous integrity of a Republican figure or even a traditional figure. At a time when classical art has become history and contemporary culture and art are swayed by the forces of the market, politics and technology, the world of virtue is undoubtedly one of the few things that can be relied upon to save oneself and save others.

5. Conclusion

Shang Yang's schema began with a search for the contemporary development of cultural roots in art and a reflection on the relationship between man and nature. Moreover, his symbolic pictorial language carries forward the spirit of Chinese art in the context of globalisation. In this process, the face of Shang Yang's art shifted from a social landscape to a natural one. This outlook is due to Shang Yang's strong literati spirit and social consciousness, which is influenced by traditional Chinese culture in landscape painting. The issues explored in his works gradually shift from national to universal social existence. The pattern develops from a smooth whole to an unbalanced and heterogeneous one in terms of external characteristics. This is the inevitable result of Shangyang's personal judgement of the deteriorating environment in the context of his understanding of the theme of man and nature. Landscape consciousness helped Shang Yang find a way to express his personal ideas and values, and landscape consciousness is a level of consciousness that does not necessitate the appearance of a landscape image in the picture, but is the vehicle through which Shang Yang expresses himself. But even though the image has been broken, the artist's deep-seated will has not changed.

In the Dong Qichang Project series, through the conceptualisation of nature, Shang Yang expresses a contemporary artist's self-reflection and critique of the relationship between man and nature in the post-industrial era; with the help of visual ritualisation, the artist has completed the dual construction of picture forms and personal image systems. At the same time, the leisurely, sparse and elegant atmosphere that pervades the painting not only gives the work a strong literati quality, but also gives it an underlying oriental cultural identity.

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